

Blunt sold Canadians looted fake paintings

By David Bamber and Chris Hastings

12:00AM GMT 04 Feb 2001 The Telegraph

ANTHONY BLUNT, the former Surveyor of the Queen's Pictures who was exposed as a Soviet spy, tricked the Canadian government into buying fake and looted paintings, The Telegraph has learned.

The National Gallery of Canada is studying the provenance of the 98 paintings it bought on the advice of the traitor over two decades. Canadian authorities had complete trust in Blunt, who worked from Buckingham Palace for 30 years before being unmasked as a Russian agent. He was paid an extra 1,000 Canadian dollars a year throughout the 1950s and 1960s to advise the National Gallery of Canada.

Three of the paintings are suspected of being looted by the Nazis during the war. One of them, Augustus and Cleopatra, which Blunt recommended the gallery buy in 1953, was attributed by him to the French artist Nicolas Poussin. This now appears to have been the work of another painter.

Blunt, who died in 1983 aged 75, claimed to be the world's leading expert on Poussin. Another painting, St John the Baptist, a mid-seventeenth century work by the Spanish painter Jusepe Leonardo, was bought by the Canadians after the war on advice by Blunt. It now seems likely that it was stolen from a Spanish aristocrat during the civil war.

Blunt also recommended that the gallery purchase another looted work, The Three Angels by Bartolome Esteban Murillo. He used Thomas Harris, a former British spy who worked for MI6, as his agent to obtain many paintings. Canadian investigators now suspect that Harris paid Blunt, a former director of the Courtauld Gallery in London, a commission to recommend the dubious works.

Pierre Theberge, the director of the National Gallery of Canada, said: "We are looking at the circumstances surrounding a number of paintings, including the acquisition of four paintings from Blunt, who was a consultant for the gallery between 1948 and 1956, and his associate Mr Harris.

"It is suggested that there are problems with at least two of them. Obviously, this is something we are examining very closely. In particular, there is a question mark hanging over what was assumed to have been a Poussin but is now a painting by an unknown Italian. The connection with Blunt is that the picture was sold through Mr Harris."

A visit made by Blunt to Germany in 1948 while he was in charge of the Royal Collection in Britain has long been the subject of speculation that he may have gone there to buy looted art. There are now demands that Blunt's dealings with other galleries, including the Queen's Royal Collection, be investigated in the light of the Canadian experience.

Lord Janner, the chairman of the Holocaust Education Trust, said: "If there is any substance to the inquiry in Canada then I hope those people responsible for the royal collections would go through the same process. I think the Royal Galleries would be the last people wishing to be in possession of stolen property."

Andrew Dismore, the Labour MP for Hendon, said: "If the investigation in Canada finds evidence that Blunt acted incorrectly then I hope the Royal Collection in Britain acts to ensure that none of the paintings in its collection is tainted." Blunt [became a communist at Cambridge University in the 1930s](#) and was the so-called Fourth Man of the Philby, Burgess and Maclean spy network that was uncovered in the 1950s.

External Links

- [National Gallery of Canada](#)
- [Blunt, Anthony \(1907 - 1983\) - Xrefer](#)
- [The Cambridge Spies - Crime Library](#)
- [The forger and the spy \[May '99\] - Findarticles.com](#)
- [World War Two and looted art - Museum Security Network](#)